

# Edwards meets the people

## Senator speaks with constituents in Vance and Warren counties

By BARBARA ARNTSEN  
Daily Dispatch Writer

Courtrooms in both Vance and Warren counties were filled to the brim Monday, but not for the usual reasons. Crowds of area citizens turned out to welcome, ask questions and air grievances to U.S. Senator John Edwards during Monday's pair of town hall meetings.

The senator told constituents in both counties that he tries to hold such open forums in North Carolina when the senate is not in session.

"This gives the people I work for -- you -- a chance to talk to me," Edwards said. "I can talk about a few things with you and let you express your concerns. People in Washington don't understand sometimes that I work for you and the only way I can do my job is to hear what you have to say."

The senator said many people in Washington were consumed with monitoring the polls to find out the concerns of the people, but he believes holding town hall meetings and talking face-to-face with the citizens is the best way to keep in touch.

"It's always interesting to me," Edwards said in an interview after the meeting, "that some of these people in Washington talk about the polls show this and the polls show that -- if you get out there and talk to real people you know what they care about."

And according to Edwards, people care about the things that affect their lives. "There are slight variations, but the themes are similar," he said.

"People care about education, their children, economic issues and sometimes other more specific items, such as lack of job opportunities in their communities or transportation problems."

Edwards said he was amazed at how many places he had been in North Carolina where people had not seen a United States senator for decades.

"I don't take money from lobbyists," he said. "But when I came to Washington I was surprised at the omnipresence of lobbying groups."

The senator said the people in his hometown of Robbins, population about 1,000, and other towns throughout North Carolina, didn't have groups of well-paid people to push their interests in Washington.

"The people I grew up with feel like their voices aren't being heard anymore," he said. "It's the people who write these big campaign checks are the only ones that get listened to and we need to do something about that. We have started by passing the Campaign Finance Reform bill in the Senate and I think that's a step in the right direction."

**U.S. Sen.  
John  
Edwards,  
D-N.C.,  
talks to  
Robin  
Jackson, a**

Edwards hit a nerve with the Vance County crowd when he brought up prescription medicine costs for senior citizens. "We shouldn't have our senior citizens, who are so important to all of us, have to decide between buying their medicine and buying their groceries," he said to thundering applause. Vance County resident Connie Jones told the senator she was in that sort of position because her husband was in a nursing home and she couldn't afford the bills.

"Every time we get some sort of cost of living increase," she said, "the nursing home bills go up even higher. I'm going to the poor house."

Vance County Board of Education member Robert Duke voiced concern about the special education programs required under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"It doesn't make sense that one parent can bankrupt the school system," he said.

Edwards said he supported making sure children with disabilities had a quality education, but agreed the federal government needs to provide more direction and funding for school systems to implement the programs.

"Washington imposes all these bureaucratic requirements on local schools and then they don't give them the money to meet them," he said. "That's what they like to call in Washington 'unfunded mandates.'"

Duke replied, "We call it that here too."

The senator also acknowledged the looming problem of teacher shortages.

"We spend a lot of time in our country looking for heroes for role models for our young people and as far as I'm concerned the man or woman teaching in their classroom's are the heroes and people ought to treat them as such."

He said it was important to provide financial incentives to get college students into the field of education and to also improve the compensation and benefits for teachers.

"We know it's a serious problem and unless we do something we're going to have a teacher shortage," he said.

The senator said he was one of a handful of Democrats who voted for a \$1.2 trillion tax cut.

"We're in the first step of the budget process," he explained and what is important is that it's not just how big a tax cut it is, but is it fair? Is it distributed evenly to the people who work or is it a particular part of the working population that gets most of the benefit? It needs to be fair."

"We need a tax cut but we have to protect Social Security and Medicare and pay down our debts."

Edwards also mentioned concern about the farmers in North Carolina.

"The president proposed a cut, a significant cut in the agriculture budget," he said. "He said at the top, I don't know the exact language so I'm paraphrasing, but he said something like times for agriculture have significantly improved in this country."

Well, what country is he living in? The farmers I talk to in North Carolina are struggling and having a very hard time."

In Warren County questions ranged from the senator's views on faith-based initiatives to future trade negotiations with China.

The senator said he supported faith-based initiatives because he believed the faith community often had a better feel on what problems were going on in cities and counties but he stressed that the program had to be carried out correctly, which included remembering the separation of church and state.

"As far as the impact the recent situation in China has had on trade," he said. "It's too early to tell. In my opinion, they kept the service people against their will and illegally. As a member of the intelligence committee I have been sort of involved in this. The short term effect is they have done some damage to their relationship with the U.S. We'll just have to see what the long-term situation will be."

When asked when the recon flights would be resumed, Edwards said he wasn't sure they had ever stopped.

"We have every right to be there, I can't tell you what kind of information we gather, but I can tell you it serves an important function," he said. "They knew we were going to be there and that's why they were being monitored."

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**resident of Warren County and a teacher at Kerr-Vance Academy in Henderson, after Edwards' town hall meeting in Warrenton Monday.** (Daily Dispatch photo by Ashley Steven Ayscue)

# Senator mobbed in Tri-County visit

By AL WHELESS  
Daily Dispatch Writer

Seeing U.S. Sen. John Edwards makes Nancy Dail feel "hopeful."

Dail, a 51-year-old administrative secretary for the city of Henderson, was one of about 400 citizens who brought their hopes, dreams, problems and questions to the North Carolina Democrat at a public forum the Superior Court room on the second floor of the Vance County Courthouse.

"I think it was good he came because people feel government is far away," said Pamela Glover, another city secretary. "I hope people will be able to see some results. They often feel they pay taxes and don't get anything for it."

A lot of subjects came up at the 45-minute meeting, but drug problems faced by youths wasn't one of them, Glover said. "The crime rate is up in Vance County and young people are getting killed. We are living in a war zone." Glover said she agreed with some of the speakers who told Edwards there needs to be more federal support for people who can't pay for basic necessities.

It is going to take a joint effort between churches and local government to determine the needs of young people and to pool resources to help them.

"I wanted to hear what the senator had to say about what he was going to do for us," said Kathie Boling, a 46-year-old Henderson resident. She works with Franklin-Granville-Vance Partnership for Children.

"Mostly, I wanted to hear his views on education, and how they impact families in this community," Boling said. "I thought it was an excellent attended meeting with a variety of topics discussed."

What impressed her the most was Edwards' ability to "zero in" on personal issues with each resident who asked questions, she said.

"I thought the meeting was good because he is helping needy people and giving them the chance to get what they really need for their families," said 15-year-old Ashley Ford, an eighth-grade student at Eaton-Johnson Middle School.

Her mother, Lisa Ford, asked Edwards to help solve the family's dilemma about health coverage.

"I don't have any health insurance," said Lisa, who is 38. I can't get it because of a birth defect in my spine." Her husband, who is disabled, and their three children are covered by Medicaid.

"If I go to work to get it (health insurance), they will lose everything," Lisa said. "I asked him how I can get help. He gave me his card and told me to call his staff and they would see what they can do to help me."

Carmen Williams, a 40-year-old housing specialist with Franklin-Vance-Warren Opportunities, thought it was very good for the community to talk with Edwards and get his ideas. "We are better informed about who he is," she said.

"There were good questions that touched on things we deal with every day at the agency," Williams said. "They included medications, low incomes, education, transportation and proper



**Sen. John Edwards is surrounded by constituents at the Vance County Courthouse Monday.**  
(Daily

housing.”

The crowd clapped when Edwards told them senior citizens shouldn't have to choose between buying medicine and buying food.

In the audience were Marian Blackwell, a past president of Vance County AARP 4082 (American Association of Retired People), and Donna Hagar, the current president of the organization.

Dispatch  
photo by  
Ashley  
Steven  
Ayscue)

“Senator Edwards is our senator,” Hagar said. “Whenever we ask him, he helps us. We e-mail him all the time and he answers. He supports the seniors. We are here this morning to support him.”

If Edwards runs for president, she will put together the largest “Republicans For Edwards” organization that ever was, Hagar said.

Blackwell said she would like for Edwards to try to get the Senate and President Bush to help seniors get Medicare coverage of prescription drugs.

“Senior prescriptions are outrageous,” Hagar said. “When you see people with \$400 to \$500 prescription bills, that’s ridiculous.”

Sylvia Allyn is president of Concerned Citizens of Vance County Highway 39 North. Allyn said she lives in a community that is highly impacted by toxic hazardous waste that has contaminated local ground water supplies.

Within a mile radius of her home, Allyn said, are a wastewater treatment plant, unlined city landfill, Vance County landfill and a solid waste transfer station.

Allyn wanted to know if the federal government can help see that the principles of environmental justice are carried out so that “communities of color” do not shoulder an unfair burden when it comes to environmental hazards.

She also wanted the federal government to help ensure the existence of a manager or other local expert on environmental issues.

Allyn hoped Edwards could have some influence on making sure communities such as Highway 39 could have access to clean water and air, and a healthy environment.

Also in the audience was 86-year-old Henrietta Clark, who taught in Vance County Schools for 35 years.

“We need money in Vance County for our schools because we are a poor county and our children are underprivileged,” she said before Edwards arrived.

“The people are taxed as much as they can be, I think,” Clark added. “The federal government needs to look after the poor counties, especially our schools.”

“I want to learn something about what kind of man he is,” said 77-year-old Joseph Taylor, who has lived in Henderson five years.

“I want to hear him talk about education, jobs and his plans for the future of the state,” said Taylor’s wife, Hilda.

Rachel Jenkins, a 17-year-old junior at Northern Vance High School, said she came to the town meeting to hear her brother, John, play in the school’s jazz band, and to learn about politics.

“People who live in small towns like Henderson need to know who their representatives are and they need to know who we are,” Rachel said.

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